Little Australians? Some Questions about National Identity and the National Literature

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E. Morris Miller's bibliography *Australian Literature from Its Beginnings to 1935* was the first attempt at a comprehensive definition and recording of an Australian literature and provided the "scholarly apparatus" for the study and teaching of this literature that developed from the 1950s through to the 1970s, a period described by Robert Dixon as one of "cultural nationalism and disciplinary specialization" which reached a peak of influence in the mid to late 1970s with the establishment of Association for the Study of Australian Literature, or ASAL (Dixon, "Boundary Work" 1). He points out, however, that during the years between the Bicentenary in 1988 and the end of the twentieth century "we can sense its end, or at least its transformation into new forms" (133). Coincidentally, in 1990, two years after the Bicentenary, the Bibliography of Australian Literature (BAL) project was begun at the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University with the aim of updating Miller's bibliography. By 1997, the BAL project had joined with others as part of the broader initiative called Australia's Literary Heritage. The end result was the formation of the electronic database AustLit in 1999. The redefining of the paradigm of nation during the 1990s through the work of scholars such as Susan Sheridan[1] and Sneja Gunew (to name only two) ensured that considerations of race and gender modified our sense of the national. AustLit comfortably accommodated the new constructs of nation: the database included specialist research subsets relating to multicultural literature, women's literature, and literary responses to Asia. But as Dixon points out, the paradigm of national was redefined not abandoned. But what happens when that construct itself comes into question?

Within the last six or seven years, the idea of nation has come under repeated and closer examination. In 1999, *Australian Literary Studies* published a series of three articles with the group heading "New Directions in Australian Literary Studies: A Preliminary Discussion in Three Articles." In the first of these, Leigh Dale asked why the paradigm of nation has been "so tenacious in the institutions of Australian literary criticism" (135)[2] and suggested it was time to move away from the "isolationism seen as necessary for the foundation of the discipline" and to re-think the "borders of nation" (134). In a 2005 review, "The Year's Work in Fiction", Kerryn Goldsworthy returns to Susan Lever's comments of the previous year about the finalists for the 2004 Miles Franklin—they were expatriate writers Shirley Hazzard and Peter Carey, New Zealander AnnaMarie Jagose, and recent arrival in Australia, South African J. M. Coetzee. Such a situation, she said: "invites reflection on the changing perceptions and literary constructions of Australian nationalism in the twenty-first century" (56). Robert Dixon's review article "Institutionalizing Australian Studies: Non-Fiction 2004–2005", points to "a growing unease with the idea of the nation as an organizing category in area studies" (128). Nicholas Jose, in the November 2005 *Australian Book Review*, is passionate about the need to preserve Australian literature "on the world map," to maintain "A Shelf of Our Own" while recognizing that Australian literature has been "Squeezed by globalization in the marketplace, intellectual fashion in the academy and opposition to intervention in the public sphere" (27).

I don't pretend to have fully represented the arguments of these scholars. I'm interested here in pointing out the common thread that runs through their observations. It seems abundantly clear that while "National constructs are regarded with suspicion" (Jose 27), the tension between maintaining a national focus, and at the same time exploring its boundaries and intersections with other spaces, is likely to provide fruitful discussion. If AustLit is to fulfill the prime function of bibliography—providing the foundation for critical and scholarly discussion—we need to be responsive to these views. But are the views in 2007 very different from Miller's in the 1930s?

Miller's bibliography was an assertion of cultural independence; its aim was to legitimize Australian literature, to emphasize its separateness from English literature, and to achieve this he needed to set recognizable boundaries. But even as he defined these, Miller was highly conscious of the complex nature of the relationships between "English" literature and writers and "Australian" literature and writers (although he was notably indifferent to Australian–American

connections). Miller rejected a definition of "Australian" that restricted it to "authors born in Australia, or resident therein from an early age, and working in and for Australia" (10). He defined an Australian author in terms that allowed inclusion of expatriate writers, provided they had spent some formative years in Australia, writers who had moved to Australia from elsewhere and had written books in Australia, and temporary residents of Australia. He does not consider the place of publication to be important or that it is "necessary that the author should write wholly on Australian themes." (10) He is in fact more inclusive than has often been supposed and he defends this inclusiveness on the grounds of the "fledgling" nature of Australian literature at that time. Australia, he says, has "a long way to travel towards literary independence; and in this transitional period we . . . [should] retain a hold on our Australian-born who write overseas" (10).

Miller surmised that in the future, with greater Australian sovereignty and independence, the difficulties in determining Australian authorship might become "less obtrusive" (10). But the problems have not diminished as he speculated they might. On the contrary, they have become more acute—dual and changing citizenship, increased immigration particularly from non–Anglo-Saxon countries, constant movement around the global village—all these phenomena have contributed to the growth of the "divided affiliations" and "multiple identities" noted by Dixon ("Internationalizing" 129).

While Miller was intent on defining national literature, he still envisaged it as a part of a "larger whole" describing his work as a "modest contribution towards a comparative study of imperial literature" (vii). Today scholars working in gender studies, Indigenous studies and diasporic writing are more interested in examining Australian literature's relationship with an even wider global literary intellectual culture (Dale 135). AustLit's criteria for inclusion are almost identical to Miller's and sixty years later we continue to have problems similar to those he encountered. If Miller's terms seem clear at first, their simplicity is soon seen to be deceptive: terms such as "formative", "expatriate", "visitor" and "resident" are very subjective both in definition and application. In many instances this involves considered scholarly assessment—for example, to determine the extent and nature of shaping influences, or the importance and relevance of subjects and themes. Assessments of this type are not the proper business of bibliographers, but bibliography needs to provide the foundations on which such assessments can be based.

Let me illustrate these difficulties with a few examples that have recently pre-occupied the AustLit team. They demonstrate how apparently simple criteria for inclusion quickly become complex.

Take first those writers who may qualify to be "Australian" by birth, education or adoption.

D. B. C. Pierre was born in Australia,[3] left at the age of six or seven, returned to live there in his twenties, "drifting for four years between Adelaide and Sydney" (Symons 6). He would be entitled to Australian citizenship. Does he hold it? He doesn't have an Australian passport. Does this matter? Were the six or seven years he spent there formative or was his sensibility molded more by his adolescence in Mexico City? Did he absorb "Australianness" during his later residency in Australia? So far he has not written on Australian themes, but in an interview this year he says that he might one day write an Australian novel. . . .

Does D. B. C. Pierre's birth in Australia make him more eligible for inclusion than Michel Faber, who went to Australia from the Netherlands with his parents at the age of seven. He was educated there and left in his early twenties to live in Scotland, where he publishes historical novels. Did he ever become an Australian citizen? Does it matter? Was his adolescent education more or less formative than D. B. C. Pierre's early childhood experiences? Does he maintain links with Australia, with family there? Does his return for the Melbourne Writer's festival indicate a sense of connection with the country, or was he simply advised to accept the invitation by his literary agent?

How do we match these cases against those who choose to be Australian, latecomers to the country such as novelist Paul Mann. In 1982, possibly shortly after arrival in Australia, Mann became an Australian citizen. He lived in South Australia but moved, during the 1990s, first to Canada and then to Maine, USA. The novels he published during his time in Australia are set in the Middle East and India. Does he have a place in Australian literature, and thence AustLit? J. M. Coetzee has also chosen to live in Australia and take out Australian citizenship. He has been considered for the Miles Franklin Award. One of his novels has an Australian character. Can we claim him or is his sensibility fully formed? What if he decides, like Paul Mann, to move on? What if Paul Mann decides to return?

What of the famous expatriates from all periods –Rosa Praed, Tasma, Christina Stead, Shirley Hazzard, Janette Turner Hospital, Peter Carey, Peter Porter? How can a bibliographer evaluate their claims to inclusion? This question bothered Miller, too. He speculated that links for some expatriate writers could become more tenuous with the passage of time. He named Frederic Manning as possibly falling into this category but was reluctant to give up Henry Handel Richardson.

What of visitors and short-term residents? This group is more difficult still to assess but includes writers whose perspectives on Australian culture have been regarded as importantly revealing. Miller was happy to accept Havelock Ellis in this category but rejected Gilbert Parker as one of a large group of writers "who have merely paid flying visits to Australia as tourists or globe trotters, and who, after returning to their homes, have ventured to write about Australia and its people" (11). Canadian-born author and politician Sir Gilbert Parker went to Australia in 1886 and was for some time associate editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He traveled extensively before settling in England in 1890 and establishing a successful career for himself as a romantic novelist. Parker describes the stories in his selection

Cumner's Son as representing "the life which for nearly four years I knew and studied with . . . affection".[4] Of the twenty stories in this collection, nine have Australian settings and subjects. In fact, Miller's bibliography has an Appendix entitled "Non-Australian Authors of Novels Associated with Australia", which does include Parker, together with D. H. Lawrence and Trollope.[5]

Since Miller's time global tourism has become epidemic. It might even be difficult to find an author who has not visited Australia. Matthew Kneale spent six weeks in Tasmania to research his novel about the convict era, *The English Passengers*. He is included in a current course on the literature of Tasmania at the University of Tasmania. He is included in AustLit. Should we also include Reginald Hill, author of the well known Dalziel and Pascoe series? He spent several weeks in Australia researching his mystery novel *Stranger House*, which deals with a young Australian's search for the truth about her grandmother—one of the orphans shipped to Australia from Liverpool in the 1950s.

What of the more problematic "virtual" visitors to Australia—those writers, often of ultra-commercial popular fiction, who have used an Australian setting, more or less well researched, just as cavalierly as they might a setting in 14th century France, with no intellectual or cultural engagement with anything genuinely Australian. Horror and fantasy writer Graham Masterton, whose novel *Corroboree* is set in Australia, is one name that suggests itself here, together with Aaron Francis, author of a popular series of "Outback" novels, and children's author Bessie Marchant, who set novels in Tasmania and Western Australia but who never, in fact, left England, researching the background for her fiction in the Bodleian library.

One could go on and on, and of course there are all sorts of differences in form, genre, quality and focus in the works of these writers and huge variations in the circumstances of their relationship to Australia as a nation and Australianness as an identity. But all these judgments require more than simply ticking off eligibility criteria in the way bureaucrats in departments of immigration do. To continue this metaphor, it seems that the job of the bibliographer is to prepare a thorough dossier on all of these contenders, and it is the job of the scholars to evaluate their claims. In answering Kerryn Goldsworthy's question, "When is an Australian writer not an Australian writer? Or an Australian book not an Australian book?" (56), the main danger seems to lie in trying to apply criteria too strictly. I feel that AustLit must relax Miller's flexible criteria even more, that criteria for inclusion must be as elastic as possible and depart from notions of nation and identity, which seem to have less and less contemporary relevance. It also seems clear that as much interest and value lie in examining the eligibility of the borderline cases for inclusion, in the exploring the connectedness of writers and literatures from diverse global cultural and ethnic groups, as derive from isolating and separating of the "purely" national. Indeed, to quote Robert Dixon again, "we are coming to see that the concept of the nation that was needed to establish Australian studies both intellectually and institutionally can also prevent us from exploring the connections that exist outside of—or in a complex set of relations to—that space ("Internationalizing" 128)

The Little Sisters

By way of illustration, I'd like to look at an example of these daily assessments of authors' eligibility for inclusion in AustLit—a (somewhat lighthearted) account of our search to find whether the Little sisters were "really" Australian. It certainly provided amusement and entertainment over a period of time but particularly for the last part of a rather slow-moving Friday afternoon. When the familiar work of descriptive and enumerative bibliography can pall, this sort of investigative, even forensic bibliography adds a bit of spice. On a more serious note, this case also highlights the artificiality of applying criteria of nationality too rigidly to writers who may usefully be the subject of critical discussion regardless of their "right of abode." The Little sisters showed up on the AustLit radar because of the listing of a single novel, *Great Black Kanba*, in Miller and Macartney. A similar non-committal entry appears in Debra Adelaide's *Bibliography of Australian Women's Literature*. Margaret Murphy's *Women Writers of Australia* lists the same novel but states that the authors are American. John Loder (*Australian Crime Fiction* 1994) describes them as "competent American authors" and notes that the sisters co-authored more than twenty detective mysteries between 1938 and 1953, but only one, *Great Black Kanba*, with an Australian connection. I was rather doubtful about the genuineness of their claim. *Great Black Kanba*, in which a murder takes place on the transcontinental railway trip between Melbourne and Perth, and which abounds in Australian stereotypes, was first published in 1944 by the sisters' publisher Doubleday, a firm which had recently begun to publish Arthur Upfield's crime fiction. This was a response to a growing interest in Australia as a result of American troops being posted to Australia. The success of Australianist Hartley Grattan's *Introducing Australia* (1942) was another example of this. Was this work simply the result of a marketing strategy, intrinsically interesting enough in its historical context, combining a saleable setting with the popularity of established writers?

Despite their popularity in America, a search of Libraries Australia found fewer than a dozen copies of books by the sisters actually held in Australian libraries, most being in a special, restricted-access collection of detective fiction (not all Australian) at the University of Sydney. A Google search was rewarding, bringing up the site of crime publisher Rue Morgue Press, which has re-published all of the sisters' titles in recent years. The site features a short account of the authors and their colorful, cosmopolitan background—before settling in the US they had lived in Mexico City and England, had later studied in England and had "three times . . . managed to make it round the world." Of their Australian connection, however, the essay only made the bald statement that they

were "Australia-born" and that their impulsive father, James F. Little, "once announced to the family that he had grown tired of Australia and packed one and all off to England, even though he had no job prospects lined up." So were these women *bona fide* Australians who could be legitimately included in our bibliography or were they the daughters of a peripatetic American, children coincidentally born in Australia and whisked away in infancy, like George Egerton or Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and therefore outside our scope?

Tantalizingly, a footnote to the essay referred to more information in the introduction to the 1988 Rue Morgue edition of *The Black Gloves*. No bibliographer can resist this sort of lead and two members of the team simultaneously pursued it—John Arnold from Monash immediately ordered a copy of the book from an Internet bookseller, and I placed an Inter Library Loan request for a copy of the introduction. When this introduction finally arrived, some more details could be added to the picture: four of the five Little children were born in Sydney and the family then moved to Western Australia. Birth and death dates for Constance (1899–1980) and Gwenyth (1903–1985) were also supplied. The information came from an interview with American journalist Ellen Nehr, other newspaper interviews, and directly from a third sister, Iris Little Heitner, herself an author. However, no references were given. We needed something more specific: AustLit prides itself on finding hard evidence for its decisions, so information like this needed substantiating from an authoritative source. I emailed Rue Morgue Press and received a speedy reply from its owner Ted Schantz. He wrote that the Ellen Nehr interview was used in a Crime Club Compendium, but that Nehr and Iris Little were both now dead. The Crime Club Compendium, apparently published in numerous editions, was difficult to identify accurately and not available in Australia.

Contemporary bibliographers, like researchers of all kinds, have a wealth of electronic information and search tools at their fingertips. Now having a place and date of birth, we could search in the online New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages. This proved to be disappointing, and my colleague Terry O'Neill, also now involved in the search, reported he was unable to find either Constance or Gwenyth there. Frustrated by this, I decided to search for newspaper interviews. These are hard to find for that period, but I do have access to the marvelous *New York Times* Digital Archive. But here I found a few disappointingly brief book notices, no reviews and no interviews. What I did find, though, was a marriage notice, announcing the forthcoming nuptials of Miss Norma Gwenyth Little, daughter of James F. Little. So this explained why we couldn't find Gwenyth in the BDM—her "real" name was Norma. Also in the *NYT*, on the same page, was a notice about a second forthcoming marriage in the family—that of their brother Robert Kendall Little, whose wedding was to take place on his parents' thirty-third wedding anniversary. Searching again for any Littles with a father named James F., we found not Gwenyth, but Norma G., and not Constance, but Jessie C., as well as their two brothers, Robert and James.

So now we had confirmation of four children born in Sydney, and names of their parents. A further search, this time of marriages, using the dates calculated from the *NYT* notice, confirmed that the parents married in St. Leonards, a Sydney suburb, in 1897. Whether visitors or not, the family had been here for some time, and four of the children were definitely born here. Thinking of other possibilities, my colleague Joan Keating suggested the family history database Family Search, maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. This gave the date and place of James Little's marriage, his wife's maiden name, Gilchrist, and his own birth place and date—Paddington, Sydney 1872. The NSW BDM confirmed this and listed a Louisa Jessie Gilchrist, born in Sydney in 1877, who could possibly be his wife. Armed with James Little's full name and some better ideas of dates, we returned to the *New York Times* archive. Luck was with us—we found his obituary, verifying all our information about him and his family. We had established that two Little sisters were second-generation Australians. Whatever the quality of *Great Black Kamba*, and whatever the inspiration for its creation—a commercial one prompted by an astute publisher or a light-hearted return to the authors' cultural origins—it qualified for inclusion.

So far, so good. But what of the youngest child Iris? The Rue Morgue articles had listed two crime novels by the third Little sister—published under the pseudonym Robert James (the names of her two brothers). Was she born in Western Australia, or did the family leave before her birth? Here we had no success. The Western Australian records are not available online. In the Family Search database accessing the U.S. Social Security Death Index, we found a record for an Iris Heitner, born 18 November 1910 and dying on 5 July 2003 in Newton, New Jersey. All the dates, places and names fitted. It was almost certainly her, but we still did not know if she was born before or after the family's departure from Australia. Could she be admitted to AustLit under a sort of literary family-reunion scheme, or was she to be excluded on a technicality? It was time to try Google again.

This proved to have unexpectedly hilarious, if inconclusive and irrelevant, results—a story not unlike the plot of a Little sisters mystery with their glamorous, independent, adventurous but sometimes "shady" heroines. Google's Iris Little, described as a "society girl" and a national champion table-tennis player, was married to a fellow table-tennis champion, Sydney Heitner. In 1950, he went missing in mysterious circumstances after a trip to New York to play in a competition. He was last seen by his brother Max, who "dropped him and a "beautiful tall woman" at the 69th Regiment Armory, Lexington Avenue and 23rd Street, while a roller derby was in progress. He said he did not remember the name of the woman, recalling only that she liked roller-skating and that she claimed to own a four-door black Oldsmobile sedan. . . ."

All but one of Constance and Gwenyth Little's novels had the word "black" in the title—*The Black Gloves*, *The Black*

Honeymoon, *The Black Shroud* and so on. They never wrote a mystery called *The Black Oldsmobile*, but perhaps the best story of all was there. ❑

Note of acknowledgement
AustLit is a collaborative project and at the time of writing our research team comprises forty individuals. This paper owes much to discussions with and insights from my colleagues; in particular, the search for the Little sisters was a group effort, involving John Arnold, Terry O'Neill and Joan Keating.

Notes

1 See particularly *Along the Faultlines* (1995).

2 Of which bibliography must surely be one.

3 D. B. C. Pierre is a writing name for Peter Finlay.

4 See "Introduction" to 1913 edition of *Cumner's Son* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913.)

5 The so-called "revision" of Miller, the 1956 publication known as "M&M", too often preferred to Miller's earlier work, does not maintain this distinction and tends to blur the subtleties.

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